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Achievement Motivation: From the Perspective of Learned Hopelessness

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This article gives a brief introduction of learned hopelessness with special emphasis on how the hopelessness theory of depression is developed (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989) and its application to studies of learned hopelessness in achievement domains. Within the theoretical framework, the concepts of attributional styles, causal attributions, learned hopelessness, and hopelessness deficits are discussed. The research problems in conceptual and assessment issues, particularly on learned hopelessness and attributional styles are highlighted.

Achievement Motivation

Motivation is important because it contributes to and predicts, along with other variables, more visible outcomes such as achievement. Achievement motivation research has been developed in four stages. In stage one during the 1940s, the experimental study of motivation was initially concerned with the search for the motors of behavior and was linked with concepts such as instinct, desire, arousal and need (Spence, 1958). In stage two during the 1960s, there was the more general shift in motivational psychology away from mechanism toward cognition (Weiner, 1972). It was gradually believed that if reward was perceived as controlling, then it undermined future effort, whereas reward perceived as positive feedback was motivating (Deci, 1975). Furthermore, reward for easy task was a cue to low ability, a belief that inhibits motivation, whereas reward for difficult task communicated that hard work was expended in conjunction with high ability, a belief that augments motivation. As cognitive approach was initially accepted, researchers began to concentrate on human rather than infra human behavior with studies associated with expectancy, anxiety about failure, locus of control and achievement needs. Motivation

determined by what one expected to get and the likelihood of getting it was the central conception in expectancy-value theories (Atkinson, 1964; Rotter, 1966). In stage three during the 1980s, there was a greater focus on self-esteem, curiosity, attributional theory, and particularly achievement strivings (Ball, 1982). In addition, the beginnings of attention paid to the self were observed in studies of self-ascription for success and failure, self-concept and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Finally in stage four during the 1990s, there are voluminous number of studies on motivation from a cognitive perspective. Research is more concerned with how students think — how they think about themselves, learning task and learning outcomes. This research has focused on a wide variety of cognitive processes including concepts such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, causal attributions, self-regulated strategies, and achievement goals. Recently, there has been a growing interest in the study of achievement motivation from the perspective of learned hopelessness in the hope of understanding of school failures in public education. Research on learned hopelessness has addressed a range of issues including how motivational processes can be conceptualized in terms of causal attributions and learned hopelessness, how these processes different across individuals and change over time, and how they can be regulated when they are maladaptive. In addition, cross-cultural studies have revealed that cultural factors mediate causal attributions for achievement. Chinese students, socialized to value hard work and endurance, take more personal responsibility for their success and failure than their western counterparts. Hence, Chinese students are more likely to attribute their achievement outcomes to internal and controllable causes such as effort and study skills than to ability (Hau, 1989). Ability is considered relatively less important and an attribute that is more controllable and can be increased by effort (Hau, 1992; Hau & Salili, 1991). Effort attribution is more adaptive than ability as it is ego-defensive and guilt-related. First, it protects self-esteem and slows down withdrawal and motivation inhibition. Second, it elicits guilt-related affects (regret, remorse, guilt) which would promote effort expenditure and motivational activation (Wicker, Payne, & Morgan, 1983). As a result, learned hopelessness can be minimized in the face of academic failure. However, in universal free education, school failures become more and more serious. To prevent school failures, there is a need to examine how the prolonged academic failures and causal attributions contribute to the onset of learned hopelessness in students.

The Learned Helplessness Theory of Depression

The hopelessness theory of depression provides a theoretical framework for studies on hopelessness and its cognitive correlates such as negative life events, hopelessness deficits and inferences people make about causes, consequences and self-characteristics (Abramson, et al., 1989) as shown in the casual Model 1 below:

Model 1 Causal Chain Implied in Abramson et al.'s Theory of Learned Helplessness.



The basic premise of the learned helplessness theory of depression is that people, in face of negative life events, become passive and depressed when they attribute negative life events to stable and global causes. Whether self-esteem collapses depends on whether they attribute the bad outcomes to internal characteristics. The construction of the theory is greatly indebted to the ideas of Seligman (1975) on the conception of learned helplessness. Seligman conceived that experiences with uncontrollable events can lead to learned helplessness (the expectation of non-contingency between one's response and desired outcomes) which, in turn, results in motivational deficits (passivity and lowered persistence), cognitive deficits (inability to perceive existing opportunity to control outcomes), and emotional deficits (sadness and self-esteem). These deficits are collectively known as learned helplessness deficits which are the components of a general syndrome labeled "depression". However, the original learned helplessness theory fails to explain:

1. The stability of helplessness deficits in time,
2. The generality of helplessness deficits across situations,
3. Why people would lose self-esteem when they perceive they are helpless,
4. Individual differences in people's susceptibility to helplessness.

Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale (1978) proposed a reformulated theory of helplessness that gave causal attributions a central place to resolve the inadequacies in the original theory.

According to this reformulation, the attribution for good and bad outcomes can be classified on three dimensions of causality. These three

causal dimensions, namely stability, globality and internality, determine respectively the generality of helplessness, the chronicity of helplessness and the lowered self-esteem, particularly if the causal attribution is stable and global. In sum, Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy's main contribution lies in the specification of why and how a person becomes hopeless and, in turn, develops the hopelessness deficits as postulated in their latest version of the theory (Abramson et al., 1989).

Depression, Helplessness and Hopelessness

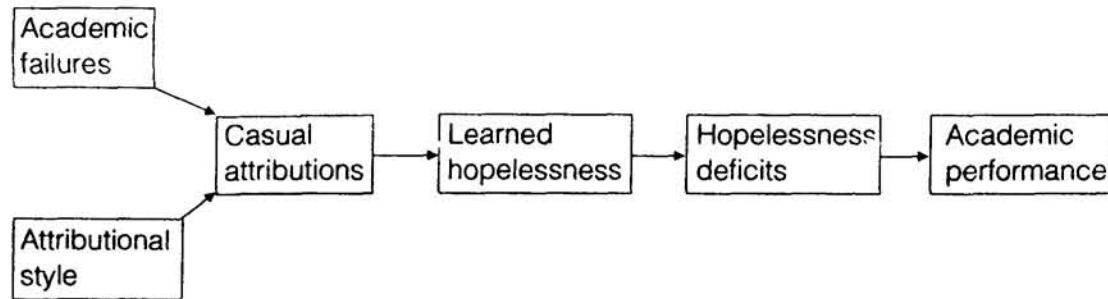
Abramson et al. (1989) specified that learned helplessness involves a high expectancy of non-contingency between one's response and desired outcomes, whereas learned hopelessness (a low expectancy of goal attainment) involves negative expectations about the occurrence of highly valued outcomes in addition to a helplessness expectancy. Thus, hopelessness is a subset of helplessness. Whereas helplessness is a necessary component of hopelessness, it is not sufficient to produce hopelessness as a subtype of depression (Garber, Miller, & Abramson, 1980). Helplessness would then be a necessary, rather than a sufficient, antecedent of general depression (Weiner, 1980).

Following this lead, one may be helpless without being hopeless as positive anticipation may be sustained by the perception that someone else is going to help (e.g., social support) or by attributing the current non-contingency to unstable external causes (e.g., task difficulty). This conception of hopelessness has recently been recognized and a hopelessness theory of depression has been formulated (Abramson et al., 1989).

Learned Hopelessness in Achievement Domains

The concept of learned hopelessness initially developed and used as a clinical tool to identify hopelessness depression, is now being investigated in academic domains by educational researchers who argue that learned hopelessness predicts deficits in achievement-oriented behaviors and achievement performance (Dweck & Wortman, 1982) as shown in the causal Model 2.

In the model, six interrelated parameters are postulated: academic failures, attributional style, causal attributions, learned hopelessness, hopelessness deficits and achievement performance. The hypothesized causal chain begins with the occurrence of academic failures and ends with

Model 2 Causal Chain between Learned Hopelessness and Other Five Cognitive Correlates.

achievement performance. The hopelessness model of achievement motivation proposes a comprehensive causal pathway that culminates in the development of hopelessness. It is a diathesis-stress model in which a particular attributional style interacting with academic failures is expected to be a risk factor for the development of hopelessness and, in turn, hopelessness deficits. That is, the combined contributions of maladaptive attributional style and academic failures lead to the increased likelihood of making a global, stable attribution for a particular academic failure. Such global and stable attribution for a particular academic failure, results in an increased probability of the development of hopelessness. Hopelessness, in turn, is a proximal sufficient cause of hopelessness deficits. The model suggests the hopelessness (a negative outcome expectancy and a helpless expectancy) to be the crucial determinant of the deficits of learned hopelessness. This hopelessness can be modulated by the inferences students make about causes, consequences and self characteristics in the face of academic failures. Within each parameter, a number of constructs and hopelessness-related behaviors are specified and elaborated as below:

Learned Hopelessness

According to the hopelessness theory, hopelessness, namely, a negative expectation about the occurrence of highly valued outcomes coupled with an expectation of helplessness about changing the likelihood of occurrence of these outcomes is the proximal sufficient cause of symptoms of hopelessness. As can be seen in the model, a sequence of academic failures is specified as contributory causes in a causal chain hypothesized to culminate in this proximal sufficient cause. Those contributory causes are anticipated to vary in how proximal they are to the occurrence of the hopelessness deficits.

Causal Attributions

When confronted with academic failures, there are inferences about causes, consequences and self-characteristics. These three kinds of inferences determine whether or not a student becomes hopeless and, in turn, develops deficits of hopelessness. In addition, it should be particularly likely to lead to hopelessness when academic failures are attributed to stable and global causes and are viewed as important. Following the same logic, inferred negative consequences and self-characteristics should be particularly likely to lead to hopelessness when these negative consequences and self-characteristics are viewed as important, not remediable, unlikely to change and as affecting many academic areas.

Attributional Styles

Attributional style refers to one's general tendency to attribute academic failures to causes that are stable in time, global in effect and internal to oneself. It is a distal contributory cause of the deficits of hopelessness that operates in the presence of academic failures. It is suggested that this attributional style interacting with academic failures predicts hopelessness and, in turn, the deficits of hopelessness. That is, the less negative a student's attributional style, the more academic failures need to be in order to interact with that style and contribute to the development of hopelessness and deficits.

Hopelessness Deficits

It is anticipated that hopelessness leads to a defined cluster of hopelessness deficits. The cluster consists of (1) motivational deficits (passivity and lowered persistence) (2) cognitive deficits (inability to perceive existing opportunity to control outcomes), (3) emotional deficits (sadness) and (4) lowered self-esteem. It is expected that the motivational and cognitive deficits derive from the helplessness expectancy component of hopelessness (expectation that nothing can be changed), whereas sadness derives from the negative outcome expectancy component of hopelessness (expectation that the future is bleak). Lowered self-esteem is a deficit of hopelessness when an academic failure is attributed to an internal, stable and global cause (Crocker, Alloy, & Kayne, 1988; Dweck & Licht, 1980). In addition, hopelessness is characterized by some other deficits such as suicide, dependency and difficulty in concentration (Abramson et al., 1988; Abramson et al., 1989; Alloy & Keoning, 1988).

Research Problems

In the past decade, investigators have used both cross-sectional and prospective research strategies to test the hopelessness theory. Overall, studies have shown that the tendency to make internal, stable, and global attributions for academic failures is correlated to severity of concurrent and future depressive deficits in college students, patients and other samples (Brewin, 1985; Peterson & Saligman, 1984; Sweeney, Anderson, & Bailey, 1986). However, inconsistency was found in research findings with some data apparently supportive of the model and some apparently not supportive at all (Forlette, Jacobson, 1987; Hammen, 1981). Although the prospective studies used to test the hopelessness theory provide important information not yielded by the cross-sectional studies, the effect of the interaction between academic failures and causal attributions on hopelessness has not been adequately examined (Cutrona, 1983). Thus, adequate tests of the diatheses-stress and causal mediation components of the theory should deserve more attention in future research of learned hopelessness, particularly in academic domains. In addition to requiring appropriate research designs, an adequate test of the hopelessness theory requires appropriate strategies for conceptualizing and assessing the various theoretical constructs featured in the theory (e.g., attributional style, negative life events, learned hopelessness). For the assessment of attributional styles, there are three important conceptual improvements that deserve attention (Abramson et al., 1988a, 1988b):

1. Attributional styles should be assessed in content domains with high personal meaning to subjects.
2. Attributional styles should interact significantly with academic failures to predict hopelessness and, in turn, deficits of hopelessness.
3. Attributional styles assessed with a hypothetical-event procedure should be good predictors of depressive reactions following real academic failures.

Conclusion

As predicted by Abramson et al. (1989), individuals who characteristically attribute negative life events to internal, global and stable causes tend to perceive themselves as hopeless in the presence of a negative life event and, in turn, develop the deficits of hopelessness. In achievement settings,

the learned hopelessness theory of depression can be used to explain deficits in motivation and achievement-oriented behaviors (Dweck, 1975; Peterson & Barrett, 1987; Weiner, 1985). Accordingly, when students face frustration and academic failures and have a negative attributional style, they tend to develop hopelessness and, in turn, the motivational deficits, cognitive deficits, affective deficits and lowered self-esteem that are characteristics of hopelessness (Abramson et al., 1989). As there is still considerable debate and little systematic data existing on the role of these causal mediation components in the etiology of learned hopelessness (Coyne and Gotlib, 1983; Peterson et al., 1985), testing these predictions will be the primary direction of future motivation research in learned hopelessness. In addition, many students influenced by cultural values which stress hard work and persistence coupled with harsh learning environment in Hong Kong may eventually develop learned hopelessness after repeated failures. So now, it is time to study and understand how students' academic failures and their characteristic attributional pattern are related to learned hopelessness in the Hong Kong context.

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